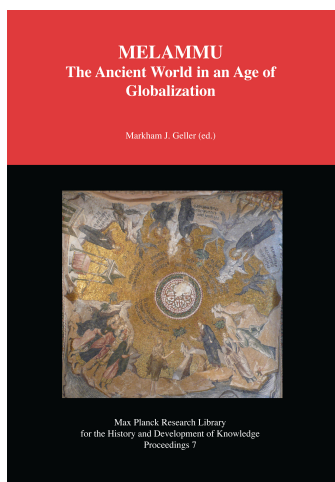


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*Simo Parpola:*

Globalization of Religion: Jewish Cosmology in its Ancient Near Eastern Context



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## **Chapter 1**

### **Globalization of Religion:**

### **Jewish Cosmology in its Ancient Near Eastern Context**

*Simo Parpola*

The cosmology of the Hebrew Bible is basic not only to Judaism but also to Christianity, and its central features are accordingly well known to all of us. Our familiarity with the subject has a drawback, however. It necessarily makes us view the components of the underlying belief structure as received facts and articles of faith, against which the cosmologies of other religions are often found as alien and, consciously or not, often regarded as primitive and inferior. Studies and presentations of Jewish cosmology are usually written by specialists in Judaism and are hence not necessarily free of bias, especially when comparisons are made with other religions and cosmological systems.

Today I would like to turn the tables and consider the subject from the viewpoint of other cultures of the Ancient Near East, especially Mesopotamia of the first millennium BCE, which is my specialty. To make it easier to follow my argument, I will first in a very cursory and condensed way outline the main features of the Jewish cosmological system. This overview is necessarily an abstraction; it does not take into consideration all cosmological concepts and themes attested in Judaism over its 3000-year history, but essential features of the Jewish system will stand out more clearly in such a simplified overview, stripped of unnecessary detail. I will then proceed to a more detailed discussion of the fundamentals of Jewish cosmology from the perspective of Mesopotamian religion.

#### **1.1 The Main Features of the Jewish Cosmological System**

The first thing to say about Jewish cosmology is that it is not interested in the physical properties of the cosmos *per se* but only in relation to the fate of man, and hence is decidedly anthropocentric in its outlook. It views the universe, created by God, dualistically as consisting of two opposite elements, heaven and earth. Heaven, the spiritual world, is the diametrical opposite of earth, the material world: it is a world of light, perfection, goodness, wisdom and eternal life, whereas the earth is a world of darkness, imperfection, wickedness, ignorance and

death. Heaven is inhabited by spiritual beings created by God. The earth with its lowest part, the underworld, is the abode of man and death. The salt-water oceans surrounding the earth are separated by a fixed-star firmament from the waters of life above, conceived as an infinite ocean of light surrounding and engulfing the physical universe.

Man, created of spirit and matter in the image of God, originally lived sinlessly in a state of innocent ignorance. However, tempted by a woman, he committed the mortal sin of transgressing a limit imposed by God, thereby losing his perfection, and was banished from the heavenly garden to the earth, where he lost his immortality and was gradually depraved to his present condition.

His situation is not hopeless, however. One perfect man, Enoch, was taken to heaven after he had all his life walked with God. Moreover, when God, frustrated with the sinfulness of mankind, decided to wipe it out by a devastating flood, He spared a righteous man, Noah, the only blameless man of his time, with whom He was pleased. Thus virtuous life according to the will of God is the key to man's salvation. The fate of Enoch teaches that perfectly righteous and pious men will not die but will live forever with God.

God's will is manifested to humans in a myriad ways, for heaven and earth are interconnected, although separate. God speaks to man directly through His Holy Spirit manifested in prophets, and the wise can understand and interpret the dreams, visions and portents sent by Him. Man's behavior is monitored from the heavens, and the deeds of the just and the wicked are recorded in the Book of Life. The prayers of the pious reach God's throne, and the spirits of prophets and morally and ethically perfect men can ascend to heaven and learn God's plans and divine secrets. At a moment known only to God, the present world order comes to an end, the books are opened, the living and the dead are called to the Last Judgment and sentenced according to their deeds, the just to eternal life and the wicked to eternal damnation.

God has revealed Himself to Moses and the patriarchs, and has chosen Israel out of all nations for His presence in the world. His temple rises on the Holy Mountain of Zion, the earthly counterpart of His celestial abode in the heights of the heavens. The people of Israel, the community of the just surrounded by a gentile world, is punished for its transgressions, but never forsaken by God. At the end of days, a god-sent Messiah-King will break the power of Satan and establish God's eternal realm of peace upon the earth.

Considered as a whole, this is a view of the world in which physical reality is perceived and judged almost exclusively in terms of spiritual values, so that physical reality becomes largely irrelevant in comparison with the metaphysical cosmos, perceived as the ultimate reality and the only true existence. It is a shamanistic conception of the cosmos, with the mount of Zion situated in the

*axis mundi* and mystically coalescing with the “mountain of God” in the zenith, which could be ascended in spirit. As such, it is not just a philosophical construct explaining the origin, structure and end of the universe, but also and above all the basis of the Jewish ethics and the Jewish doctrine of salvation. This aspect of Jewish cosmology is firmly anchored in the Bible and remains unchanged until the present day.

Such a view of the cosmos is, however, not unique to Judaism. Any specialist in Ancient Near Eastern civilizations will easily find numerous parallels to it in sources of his or her specialty. In my own field of expertise, the Assyrian civilization of the first millennium BCE, the available parallels are so numerous and consistent that it can be claimed that the Assyrian cosmological system was essentially identical with the contemporary Jewish one. And I would go even farther than that: not only were these two cosmological systems essentially the same in their structure, but they were also teleologically analogous: *The Assyrian perception of the cosmos was likewise primarily morally and ethically oriented, and aimed at the salvation of man through spiritual perfection.*

This is not to say that there were no differences. On the contrary, Mesopotamian sources are replete with details specific to that particular culture and not found in Jewish Scripture, so that it is difficult for a non-specialist in Mesopotamian religion and culture to recognize their underlying meaning and their points of contact with the Scriptures. This is natural since the relevant sources are products of a different (albeit related) culture with a different historical, religious and literary frame of reference. In order to recognize the essence of the Mesopotamian cosmological system, we must penetrate behind the screen constituted by these culture and context specific layers, which in the final analysis are secondary for the understanding of the underlying thought.

Let me now look at the building blocks of Jewish cosmology more closely in the light of Mesopotamian parallels. I have to review quite a few issues, some of which are quite complicated, but this review is necessary before I can proceed to my concluding remarks.

## 1.2 Mesopotamian Parallels

### 1.2.1 Creation of the World

I begin with the Mesopotamian creation myth, *Enūma eliš*,<sup>1</sup> which is much longer than the condensed account in Genesis, but essentially parallel in its main lines. The myth ascribes the creation of heaven and earth to Marduk, king of the gods,

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<sup>1</sup> The most recent edition is (Talon 2005).

who, like the biblical God, also creates the sun and the moon and the stars, separates the cosmic waters from each other, and rests after his work (Tablet VI 70–75). Before creation, he slays the cosmic dragon and its retinue, an event that has been omitted from Genesis but is repeatedly referred to elsewhere in the Bible and other ancient Near Eastern cosmologies.

### 1.2.2 Creation of Man

In the myth, Marduk also commissions the creation of man, assigning the task to Ea, the god of wisdom. The creation of man is also related or alluded to in many other Mesopotamian myths, and in each case the account is similar, although a little different. In *Atrahasis*, man (*lullû*) is designed by Ea but actually created by the mother goddess Belet-ili. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the term *lullû* applies to Enkidu, the wild man created as a counterweight to Gilgamesh. Here the creation is commissioned by the divine council headed by Anu, the god of heaven, and executed by the mother goddess, Aruru; only the name of Enkidu, which means “Ea created,” reveals that the god of wisdom here too designed the man.<sup>2</sup> The multiplicity of gods participating in the creation process reflects the fact that in first-millennium Mesopotamian religion, all manifest gods were understood as powers of a single transcendental deity, who unified all of them in his being and is hence often referred to as *Ilāni*, “the gods,” but was himself not directly involved in the affairs of the cosmos. The name *Ilāni* is formally plural but construed as a singular noun, and is thus an exact equivalent of the name of God (*Elōhīm*) in the biblical story of creation.<sup>3</sup> On the basis of the Mesopotamian parallels, we can understand why God in this context enigmatically refers to Himself in the plural, saying, “Let us make man in our image and likeness,” [Gen. 1: 26] and later, “The man has become like *one of us*, knowing good and evil [Gen. 3: 22].”

While the motif of breathing the breath of life into man’s nostrils [Gen 2: 7] at first sight seems to be lacking in Mesopotamia, this central feature of the Biblical creation story is in fact encoded in all Mesopotamian creation myths. The mother goddess, who was an aspect of Ištar, the goddess of love, and the source of life of all living beings, was associated with the dove, the Jewish and Christian symbol of the divine spirit, and definitely plays the role of the spirit of god in Mesopotamian prophecy.<sup>4</sup> As we shall see, she also played the role of the human soul in the myth of the *Descent of Ištar to the Netherworld* and the associated sacred marriage ritual.

<sup>2</sup>See (Parpola 1998, 318).

<sup>3</sup>See (Parpola 1993b, 187 n. 97; Parpola 2000, 162–172).

<sup>4</sup>See, in detail, (Parpola 1997, xxvi–xxix).

### 1.2.3 The Fall of Man

The Sumerian myth *Inanna and Šukalletuda* (ETCSL 1.3.3<sup>5</sup>) explains why the fall of man is in the Bible placed in a garden, which in the ancient Near East generally was a place for lovemaking and amorous encounters. Šukalletuda, son of the god Igisigsig,<sup>6</sup> is a man charged with watering a garden plot. One day, the storm-wind blows dust into his eyes. Rubbing them, he sees gods in the horizon, and realizes he is looking at “perfect divine powers” and “the fate of the gods” (lines 101–106). He then finds the goddess Inanna asleep at the foot of a shady poplar tree,<sup>7</sup> removes the belt of divine powers on her lap, and has intercourse with her and kisses her. For this sacrilegious act, he is, like Adam, driven from the garden (lines 231–238) and punished with death (lines 295–297). We see that “eating the fruit of the tree” in the biblical account indeed was an allegory for sexual intercourse, as already noted by rabbinical commentators. In other Mesopotamian contexts, the garden is, as in the Song of Songs, associated with heavenly weddings and bliss. As in Jewish mysticism, it is also found as a metaphor for the tablet house as a place of heavenly bliss derived from the exegesis of religious literature (Lapinkivi 2004, 217–218 and 227).

Apart from *Inanna and Šukalletuda*, the motif of the Fall is also encountered in other Mesopotamian myths. In the *Gilgamesh Epic*, Enkidu, the primitive man created by the gods, initially lives a life of blissful innocence with animals of the steppe. He is, however, seduced by a harlot, and after the intercourse suddenly becomes, like Adam, conscious of his animal state.<sup>8</sup> The woman then dresses him up and leads him away from the steppe “like a god.”<sup>9</sup>

In the *Etana myth*, the fallen soul is an eagle nesting at the top of a tree, who swears an oath of eternal brotherhood to a snake nesting at the root of the tree. However, coveting the young of the snake, he breaks his oath and eats the offspring of his brother. For this sacrilegious deed, he is punished and cast wingless into a deep pit. Through repentance and grace of god, he finally regains his wings and can ascend to heaven (Parpola 1993b, 195–199). In the *Descent of Ištar*, the goddess herself plays the role of the fallen soul. Coveting the rule over the

<sup>5</sup>See <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.3.3#>. See the discussion in (Lapinkivi 2004, 220–226).

<sup>6</sup>Defined as the “chief gardener of the god of heaven” in the god list An-Anum (Litke 1998, 30 i 92).

<sup>7</sup>Compare the rabbinical tradition preserved in 3 Enoch 5 (Gruenwald 1980, 50), “From the day when the Holiness expelled the first Adam from the Garden of Eden, Shekhinah was dwelling upon a Keruv under the Tree of Life... And the first man (was) sitting outside the gate of the Garden to behold the radiant appearance of the Shekhinah.”

<sup>8</sup>Gilg. I 196–202 (George 2003, I 551). Note George’s comments on line 199 (George 2003, II 798), establishing a definite link between Adam’s and Enkidu’s fall as a result of illicit sexual intercourse.

<sup>9</sup>It is worth pointing out that the word “steppe” is in this context consistently written with the Sumero-gram eden.

netherworld, she leaves her heavenly home, descends through the seven gates of the netherworld, loses her garments and powers, falls sick and dies, but is revived through the grace of her divine father, the god of wisdom, and can start her ascent to heaven, in the course of which she regains her lost robes and powers. This myth lives on in the myth of the fall of Sophia in Gnosticism and in the figure of the “lower Shekhinah” in Jewish mysticism.<sup>10</sup>

Both woman and snake are thus well attested in Mesopotamia in roles paralleling those of Eve and the serpent in Genesis. They symbolize forbidden things and divinely imposed taboos. Revealingly, the Akkadian word for “whore,” *harimtu*, literally means “forbidden woman.”<sup>11</sup>

### 1.2.4 The Flood

We now leave the subject of creation and move on to the Flood story, which has long since been recognized as a loan from Mesopotamia. The same is true of the list of antediluvian patriarchs in Genesis 5, which has an obvious parallel and antecedent in the Sumerian king list (Kvanvig 1984, 161–178). The incredibly long lifetimes of the antediluvian patriarchs served to illustrate the quasi-divine longevity of the human race before its depravation, which caused the Flood. This point is made even clearer by the lifetimes of the Mesopotamian kings, which lasted up to 43,200 years before the Flood, but were drastically shortened after it.

The Flood story is attested in Mesopotamia since Sumerian times and is included in two Akkadian myths, *Atrahasis* and *Gilgamesh*. Both closely parallel the biblical story. The Mesopotamian Flood hero, Ziusudra/Utnapishtim, is saved because of his wisdom and piety, while mankind is wiped away because of its “noise,” which is a metaphor for sinfulness and corruption.<sup>12</sup> As in the Bible, the gods repent the destruction of mankind, and the mother goddess bitterly weeps the fate of her creatures, vowing to never let it happen again.<sup>13</sup>

This image of the weeping goddess played an important role in Mesopotamian religion, and resurfaces in Jewish mysticism in the form of the weeping Shekhinah, the female aspect of God, who is often referred to as suffering for the sins of the world.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup>See (Parpola 1997, xxxi–xxxvi; Lapinkivi 2004, 166–194).

<sup>11</sup>Akkadian *harāmu*, “to seclude, separate,” is a cognate of Hebrew חָרַם “to seclude, put under ban, taboo.” Breaking a divine taboo meant committing a mortal sin. That is why Gilgamesh, in contrast to Šukalletuda, chose to resist the temptation to marry the goddess Ištar, whose Sumerian epithet nu-gig means “the tabooed one” (Zgoll 1997) and whose holiness and virginity are constantly stressed in Mesopotamian sources.

<sup>12</sup>See (Parpola 1997, 16 *ad* ii 19).

<sup>13</sup>Gilg. XI 117–124 (George 2003, 164–171; II 711 and 715).

<sup>14</sup>See (Parpola 1997, xxviii with n. 88, and xxxiv–xxv with nn. 141–44).

In the creation myth *Enūma eliš*, Ištar appears as the bow by which Marduk slays the raging sea-dragon, Tiamat. Later Anu, the god of heaven, kisses the bow, calls it daughter, and sets it as rainbow in the sky, just as God in Genesis sets His bow in the cloud after the flood. Thus Ištar, the goddess of love, is the “deluge-bow” by which the supreme god destroys the wicked but saves the just. The rainbow’s brilliant spectrum of colours symbolized the divine powers converging in the god of heaven and his daughter, the goddess of love, while its arc formed a bridge between heaven and earth.<sup>15</sup>

### 1.2.5 The Ascent to Heaven

The stairway reaching from the earth to the heavens, on which Jacob in his dream saw angels go up and down, has a striking parallel in the myth of *Nergal and Ereshkigal* (Hutter 1985), where divine messengers commute between heaven and earth by “the long staircase of heaven.”<sup>16</sup> The idea of a stairway leading to heaven derives from the Mesopotamian temple tower, whose seven stages painted in different colors associated it with the seven-staged descent and ascent of Ištar. Each of the seven stages of the ziggurat corresponded to a different heavenly palace, through whose gate the descending and ascending soul-goddess had to pass (Parpola 2000, 199). Mystical ascent through these heavens and palaces to the throne of god forms the subject of many Mesopotamian myths, for example, *Etana* and *Adapa*,<sup>17</sup> and is a commonplace in the Jewish mystical literature.

### 1.2.6 The Heavenly Council

As described in Psalm 82 and elsewhere, the biblical God sits on His throne in heaven and gives judgment in the midst of the gods, exalted far above all gods in the divine council. This image has an exact counterpart in the Mesopotamian divine council, which directed the cosmos and judged the acts of humanity like a court of law.<sup>18</sup> Its members, the great gods, correspond to the seven archangels of apocalyptic Judaism and the Sefirotic powers of Kabbalah. Each of them ruled over a planet and represented a specific aspect of the transcendental God.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup>See (Parpola 1997, xci n. 114; Parpola 2000, 200).

<sup>16</sup>Col. i 16, 53; iv 26; v 13, 42; cf. (Hutter 1985, 159).

<sup>17</sup>See (Parpola 1993a, xix).

<sup>18</sup>See (Starr 1983, 56–59).

<sup>19</sup>See (Parpola 1995, 171 and 180–181).



### 1.2.7 The Messiah and the Last Judgment

The Messianic king of the apocalypses corresponds to Ninurta/Nabû, the Mesopotamian cosmic saviour and the celestial paragon of the human king (Annus 2002, 187–192). Several myths describe his battles against monsters symbolizing the forces of chaos, darkness, disease, sin and death, his triumphal return to heaven in his chariot of war, and his elevation to almightiness beside his father, the divine king (Parpola 2001). Seated on the throne of heaven, he directs the universe and holds “the tablet of destinies,” also called “the tablet of sins” (Finkel 1983) and “the book of life” (*lē’u ša balāṭi*; Paul 1973, 351). He is magnified to cosmic dimensions; stars, constellations and other gods become his limbs (Annus 2002, 59–161 and 205–206). He returns to the world whenever the divine world order is under threat, and establishes a new world in an eschatological judgment scene, rewarding the good and punishing the wicked for their deeds.

The Ninurta mythology stresses his heaven-like perfection, which was the precondition of his elevation, but at the same time also his identity with the human king. On the one hand, he is one of “the gods, his brothers,” and is admitted to the assembly of gods and given access to divine secrets; on the other hand, he receives eternal life for his fate, which makes sense only if he is human (Parpola 2001, 186). As defender and upholder of the divine order in heaven and on earth, he personifies the cosmic tree uniting heaven and earth, and is equated with it in numerous contexts (Annus 2002, 156–159).

### 1.2.8 The Tree of Life

As Ninurta in human form, Mesopotamian kings were since earliest times likewise equated with the cosmic tree. In the Sumerian myth *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, the messenger of the Sumerian king says of his lord: “My king is a huge *mes* tree, the son of Enlil; this tree has grown high, uniting heaven and earth; its crown reaches heaven, its trunk is set upon the earth.”<sup>20</sup> And a hymn to Šulgi tells the king: “You are as strong as a poplar tree planted by the side of a watercourse. You are a sweet sight, like a fertile *mes* tree laden with colourful fruit. You are cherished by Ninegala, like a date palm of holy Dilmun. You have a pleasant shade, like a sappy cedar growing amidst the cypresses.”<sup>21</sup>

The king’s equation with the tree is also implicit in the name of Gilgamesh, which in its first-millennium orthography can be interpreted to mean “he equalled the tree of balance” (Parpola 1998, 323–325). The original Sumerian name, Bilga-mes, means “the shoot of the *mes* tree,” and thus likewise connects this

<sup>20</sup>Lines 519–523 (<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section1/tr1823.htm>).

<sup>21</sup>Šulgi D 32–35 (<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.4.2.04#>).

“perfect king” with the cosmic tree. However, *mes* also meant “man” in Sumerian, and the name could thus also be understood as “the scion of man.”<sup>22</sup> “Palm tree, tree planted near streams of water, righteous shoot,” and “the son of man” are, of course, all well-known designations of the Davidic Messiah and the perfect man in the New Testament.

A man equated with a tree is also found in Jewish mysticism. He is Adam Qadmon, the heavenly Adam, whose spiritual structure, represented in the form of a tree diagram, was believed to contain the key to man’s original perfection. This esoteric diagram is explicitly linked with the biblical Tree of Life, of which it is said in Genesis 3: “And the *Lord* God said, Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; what if he now reaches out his hand and takes fruit of the tree of life, eats it and lives for ever?”

I have argued for years that the Kabbalistic tree is derived from the Mesopotamian cosmic tree understood as representing the spiritual structure of the Mesopotamian ideal king (Parpola 1993a). The perfection of the king resides in the divine powers, which he shares with the supreme god and which are represented in Mesopotamian iconography as fruits distributed on the trunk and branches of the tree. These divine powers correspond to the Sefirot of the Kabbalistic tree, and their distribution on the tree reflects the order in which the goddess Ištar, the archetypal soul, lost her powers and virtues during her descent from heaven.<sup>23</sup> Both the king and the goddess are explicitly equated with the palm tree, which is the most frequent rendition of the cosmic tree in Assyrian iconography.

Apart from its significance to the royal ideology, the tree played an important role in the cult of Ištar as a *mandala* outlining the path of the soul to spiritual salvation and eternal life.<sup>24</sup> In line with the *Descent of Ištar*, the devotees of the goddess were envisaged as virgins preparing themselves for heavenly weddings with the celestial redeemer Tammuz, equated with the king.<sup>25</sup> A large corpus of Mesopotamian love lyrics closely paralleling the biblical Song of Songs confirms that mystical union with God was the main goal of the cult (Nissinen 2001; Lapinkivi 2004). In actual practice, it was extremely ascetic in character and involved mortification of flesh, and study and contemplation of sacred texts.<sup>26</sup> Ecstatic prophets functioned as mouthpieces of the goddess, as in ancient Israel.

<sup>22</sup>In Akkadian, “shoot” (*pir’u*) could also mean “son, descendant offspring.” See also (Annus 2001).

<sup>23</sup>See (Parpola 2000, 197–198).

<sup>24</sup>Cf. (Parpola 1997, xxxiv and xcv n. 134).

<sup>25</sup>See (Lapinkivi 2004, 155–206).

<sup>26</sup>See (Parpola 1997, xlv–xlviii).

### 1.3 Conclusions

Time forbids continuing this survey, which unfortunately ended up being much more shallow and less comprehensive than I had originally planned. I hope, however, that even the few cases discussed have made clear the point I am trying to make: despite all the superficial differences, Mesopotamian cosmology is very much in line with the Jewish one. When one eliminates the culture-specific layer resulting from the different frames of reference, one can say that essentially we are dealing with the same cosmology and the same associated imagery. And this applies not only to the system as a whole but to its details as well. If we were dealing with isolated detail parallels or general similarities, it could be argued that the parallels are to be dismissed as fortuitous. But this is not the case. The observed similarities are too numerous, detailed and complex to be due to mere chance; they form an interlocking system, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle or words of a crossword puzzle.

I refer here in particular to such complex interlocking parallels as the deluge story combined with the rainbow motif and the fall of man combined with the tree of life. Flood stories are known from many other cultures, but none of them follows the Mesopotamian account as closely as the biblical one, and none of them shares the complex symbolism of the rainbow common to the Mesopotamian and Jewish traditions. Similarly, while the cosmic tree is a cosmological symbol attested almost everywhere, the Jewish tree with its multi-layered symbolism is clearly a copy of the Mesopotamian one.

It is important to underline that the fundamentally moral and ethical orientation of Jewish cosmology is also characteristic of Mesopotamia. This is not only evident from the structural similarity of the two systems but also from the overwhelmingly moral and ethical undertone of Mesopotamian mythology and scholarly, religious and philosophical literature, as well as from the religious aspect of Mesopotamian kingship. It is a mistake to read Mesopotamian myths superficially, ignoring their spiritual layers of meaning, or to think that the Mesopotamians were only concerned about material values and fertility and did not care about life after death.

Against this background, I find it hard to subscribe to often repeated view—for example in the recent seventh edition of the *New Standard Jewish Encyclopedia*—that “Judaism was the first religion to make [the creation of the world by God] a central principle of its faith and a basis for its system of ethics” (Wigoder 1992, 241 s.v. *cosmogony and cosmology*). It seems to me that given the great similarity of the Mesopotamian and Jewish cosmological thought and the great antiquity of the former, such a claim is unsubstantiated and should be withdrawn.

The closeness of Jewish and Mesopotamian cosmologies is, of course, in no way surprising, considering the geographical proximity and manifold contacts of the two cultures. The entire Levant had since the third millennium BCE been under Mesopotamian cultural influence; Israel and Judah were Assyrian provinces or dependencies for more than a hundred years, with their elites in constant contact with Assyria; large parts of the Hebrew Bible were written or edited in the Babylonian exile; most of Rabbinic and Gaonic literature was written in Babylonia; and the roots of the Kabbalistic doctrines are also to be sought in Babylonia. The Jews returning from the exile under Ezra and Nehemia had been in Babylonia for 250 years and had meanwhile been thoroughly Mesopotamianized. This does not mean that they had given up their Jewish identity or culture, but simply that they had received and internalized many cultural impulses from Mesopotamia. Notice that Josephus believed the Jews to be descendants of the Chaldeans and that Palestinian Jews of the rabbinical period called the eastern Jews “Babylonians.”

While many parts of Jewish cosmology thus can be certainly traced back to Mesopotamia, it would be totally wrong to say that it as a whole was just a loan from Mesopotamia. Cultures with their cosmologies, religions and philosophies are like languages, which constantly update themselves in line with scientific and technological advances, but nevertheless retain their independence and distinctive features. They borrow new words without inhibitions but always adapt them to their own phonological and morphological systems, so that they are no longer recognized as loanwords but felt as parts of the native vocabulary; while old words keep falling out of use or acquire new, updated meanings and senses. Cultures and ideologies behave in the same way. They respond to the changing world by constantly assimilating new ideas, often without noticing it, but always adapting them to the existing overall system. A case in point is the vision of Ezekiel by the Kebar river, which despite its thoroughly Mesopotamian imagery and cosmology remains distinctly Jewish. It is precisely this ability to adapt to cultural change that has helped Jewish cosmology to survive virtually unchanged to the present day, despite the by now radically altered scientific view of the universe. Moreover, cultural change is always a two-way or multilateral process. Throughout their history, the ancient Jews received impulses from many cultures, not only from Mesopotamia, and so did the ancient Mesopotamians. Thus the parallelism of the Mesopotamian and Jewish cosmologies belongs rather under the heading of “cultural exchange” than “cultural borrowing.”

It is fascinating and instructive to follow the history of Jewish cosmology from this perspective. The system as a whole remains fundamentally unchanged, but things are emphasized differently in different situations and circumstances. Thus apocalypticism and messianism, which are built-in components of both

Mesopotamian and Jewish cosmology, become really dominant in Judaism only after the abolishment of the Davidic monarchy. The phenomenon is comparable to the rebirth of the cult of Jahwe in an emphatically monotheistic, aniconic form in post-exilic Judaism in response to the destruction of the First Temple and impulses received from Mesopotamia, which are reflected in the post-exilic name of God, Elohim. My intention in this paper has simply been to draw attention to the fundamental parallelism of the Jewish and Mesopotamian intellectual traditions, which is easily obscured by the numerous surface differences resulting from the different frames of reference of these two traditions. Having myself drawn considerable profit from a study on Jewish mysticism in my own work, I find that these two parallel traditions complement and elucidate each other, and cannot be fully understood in isolation.

### Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was presented at Johns Hopkins University as the 2005 Potts Memorial Lecture, aiming to compare scientific and traditional Jewish views of cosmology. Since many of the matters touched upon here are common knowledge, footnotes have been kept to a minimum and are mainly intended to guide non-Assyriologists to specialized Assyriological studies, where details can be found.

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